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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on providing the reader several key insights into the change process in higher education by: (1) presenting a common language for organizational change; (2) describing the multidisciplinary research base on change; (3) highlighting the distinct characteristics of higher education institutions and how this might influence the change process; (4) reviewing models and concepts of organizational change derived within higher education, comparing and contrasting different approaches; and (5) providing principles for change based on a synthesis of research within higher education. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

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Understanding and Facilitating Change in Higher Education in the 21st Century

By Adrianna Kezar

A critical synthesis of research literature on the process of organizational change at the institutional level is needed because higher education is being asked to be responsive to an ever-changing environment. This work focuses on providing the reader several key insights into the change process by (1) presenting a common language for organizational change; (2) describing the multidisciplinary research base on change; (3) highlighting the distinct characteristics of higher education institutions and how this might influence the change process; (4) reviewing models/concepts of organizational change derived within higher education, comparing and contrasting different approaches; and (5) providing principles for change based on a synthesis of the research within higher education.

Providing a Language for Understanding Organizational Change

Some generic definitions of organizational change have been offered by theorists. For example, Burnes noted that organizational change refers to understanding alterations within organizations at the broadest level among individuals, groups, and at the collective level across the entire organization (1996). Another definition is that change is the observation of difference over time in one or more dimensions of an entity (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). But these definitions fail to capture the assumptions inherent in different models or theories of change. For example, cultural and social-cognition theories of change would replace the word observation with the word perception in the second definition above. Theorists exploring change through a cultural or social-cognition perspective would examine not dimensions (typically organizational structural characteristics such as size), but values or organizational participants' mental maps. Because the language relating to change differs, a common language is difficult to find. However, certain concepts are common across various models, such as forces or sources of change and first-order or second-order change. These common concepts are noted within key sources of change literature such as Burnes, 1996; Goodmon, 1982; Levy and Merry, 1986; and Rajagopalan and Spreitzer, 1996. As these scholars studied change, these concepts became critical points of concern in their analyses. Forces and sources examine the why of change. First and second/second order, scale, foci, timing, and degree all refer to the what of change. Adaptive/generative, proactive/reactive, active/static, and planned/unplanned refer to the how of change. Last, the target of change refers to the outcomes. As a campus begins to engage in a change process, members of the organization need to first examine why they are about to embark on the process, the degree of change needed, and what is the best approach to adopt.

Theories of Change

Six main categories of theories of change assist in understanding, describing, and developing insights about the change process: (1) evolutionary, (2) teleological, (3) life cycle, (4) dialectical, (5) social cognition, and (6) cultural. Each model has a distinct set of assumptions about why change occurs, how the process unfolds, when change occurs and how long it takes, and the outcomes of change. The main assumption underlying evolutionary theories is that change is a response to external circumstances, situational variables, and the environment faced by each organization (Morgan, 1986). Social systems as diversified, interdependent, complex systems evolve naturally over time because of external demands (Morgan, 1986). Teleological theories or planned change models assume that organizations are purposeful and adaptive. Change occurs because leaders, change agents, and others see the necessity of change. The process for change is rational and linear, as in evolutionary models, but individual managers are much more instrumental to the process (Carnall, 1995; Carr, Hard, and Trahant, 1996). Life-cycle models evolved from studies of child development and focus on stages of growth, organizational maturity, and organizational decline (Levy and Merry, 1986). Change is conceptualized as a natural part of human or organizational development. Dialectical models, also referred to as political models, characterize change as the result of clashing ideology or belief systems (Morgan, 1986). Conflict is seen as an inherent attribute of human interaction. Change processes are considered to be predominantly bargaining, consciousness-raising, persuasion, influence and power, and social movements (Bolman and Deal, 1991). Social-cognition models describe change as being tied to learning and mental processes such as sensemaking and mental models. Change occurs because individuals see a need to grow, learn, and change their behavior. In cultural models, change occurs naturally as a response to alterations in the human environment; cultures are always changing (Morgan, 1986). The change process tends to be long-term and slow. Change within an organization entails alteration of values, beliefs, myths, and rituals (Schein, 1985). Some researchers suggest using several models or categories, as each sheds light on different aspects of organizational life (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). The advantage to multiple models is that they combine the insights of various change theories. Bolman's and Deal's (1991) reframing of organizations and Morgan's (1986) organizational metaphors illustrate how assumptions from teleological, evolutionary, political/cultural, social-cognition, and lifecycle models can be combined to understand change.

Understanding the Nature of Higher Education Organizations: Key to Successful Organizational Change

There are two main reasons it is necessary to develop a distinctive approach to change within higher education: overlooking these factors may result in mistakes in analysis and strategy, and using concepts foreign to the values of the academy will most likely fail to engage the very people who must bring about the change. In order to develop a distinctive model, the following unique features of higher education institutions need to be taken into account: *Interdependent organization *Relatively independent of environment *Unique culture of the academy *Institutional status *Values-driven *Multiple power and authority structures *Loosely coupled system *Organized anarchical decision-making *Professional and administrative values *Shared governance *Employee commitment and tenure *Goal ambiguity *Image and success

Although not an exhaustive list, this represents some of the key features of higher education institutions that affect organizational change. (For a

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more detailed description of these characteristics, see Birnbaum, 1991.)

In light of these distinctive organizational features, higher education institutions would seem to be best interpreted through cultural, social-cognition, and political models. The need for cultural models seems clear from the embeddedness of members who create and reproduce the history and values, the stable nature of employment, the strong organizational identification of members, the emphasis on values, and the multiple organizational cultures. Because there are no bottom-line measures for examining performance in higher education, image and identification are extremely important in understanding if change is occurring and how it occurs. The relationships of image and identification to change seem to indicate that social cognition is important to understand. Furthermore, the loosely coupled structure, anarchical decision-making, and ambiguous goals make meaning unclear, and social-cognition models' emphasis on multiple interpretations may be important to consider when examining and facilitating change. The shared governance system, organized anarchy, conflicting administrative and professional values, and ambiguous, competing goals also point to a need for the interpretive power of political models. Evolutionary models are important for understanding the impact of environmental factors on change, such as accreditation, foundations, and legislatures in an interdependent system, especially since these factors are growing in magnitude and influence. However, even though a higher education institution is an open system, it may have internal consistency and logic that can be damaged by the intrusion of external environmental forces.

Higher Education Models of Change: Examination Through the Typology of Six Models

An extensive review of all the research on change conducted specifically within higher education, and within the framework of the six theories outlined above, provides a set of insights about the change process in this context. The cumulative evidence, so far, suggests that organizational change can best be explained through political, social-cognition, and cultural models. Political processes such as persuasion, informal negotiation, mediation, and coalition-building appear to be very powerful strategies for creating change (Conrad, 1978; Hearn, 1996). Social-cognition models illustrate the importance of altering mental models, learning, constructed interaction, and other processes for creating change (Eckel and Kezar, forthcoming; Weick, 1995). Cultural models demonstrate the importance of symbolism, history and traditions, and institutional culture for facilitating change on campus (Cohen and March, 1974; Kezar and Eckel, forthcoming). Evolutionary models highlight some key characteristics of change, such as homeostasis, interactivity of strategies, or accretion, that appear important to understanding change. Life-cycle models have not, for the most part, been applied to higher education institutions, but show promise for helping to develop explanations of how organizational change occurs. There is mixed evidence about the explanatory power of teleological models, but to date they appear to have limited support from the research in terms of how change actually occurs in higher education and of efficacy for facilitating change. Some strategies, such as incentives or vision, have proven successful for creating change.

Research-Based Principles of Change

A complex set of research-based principles emerges from this extensive review of the research. These principles include:

**Promote organizational self-discovery *Be aware of how institutional culture affects change*

**Realize that change in higher education is often political *Lay groundwork for change*

**Focus on adaptability *Construct opportunities for interaction to develop new mental models*

**Strive to create homeostasis and balance external, forces with internal environment *Combine traditional teleological tools such as establishing vision, planning, or strategy with social-cognition, cultural, and political strategies *Be open to a disorderly process *Facilitate shared governance and collective decision-making *Articulate core characteristics *Focus on image *Connect the change process to individual and institutional identity *Create a culture of risk and help people in changing belief systems *Be aware that various levels or aspects of the organization will need different change models *Realize that strategies for change vary by change initiative *Consider combining models or approaches, as is demonstrated within the multiple models*

These will help you to develop a systematic and systemic process of change that works with individuals, acknowledges change as a human process, is sensitive to the distinctive characteristics of higher education, is context-based, achieves balance of internal and external forces, and is open to creativity and leveraging change through chance occurrences.

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